

COLOR MACHINE

BY

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Jaime David

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Chairperson Mary Anne Jordan

David Brackett

Tanya Hartman

Matthew Burke

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The Thesis Committee for Jaime David
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COLOR MACHINE

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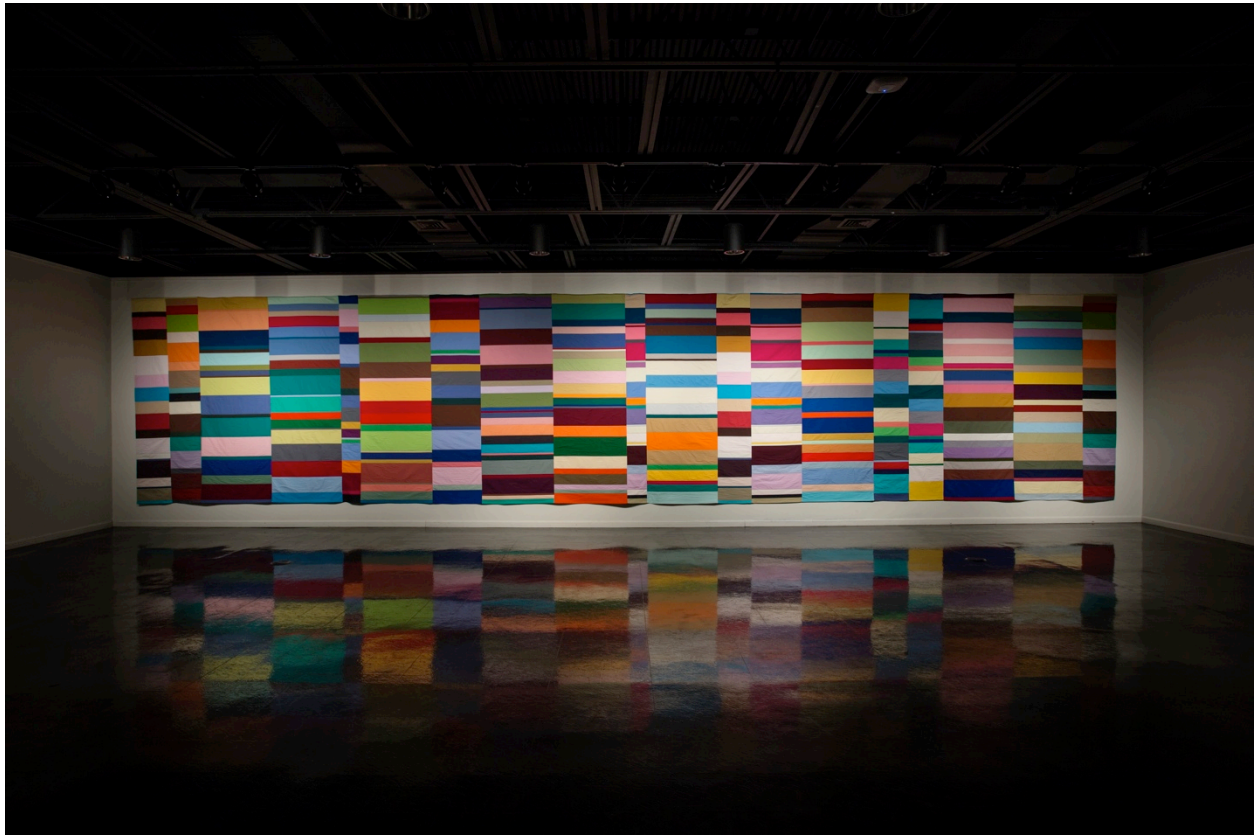
COLOR MACHINE

Abstract

Color Machine is a continued exploration of the manipulation and perception of color. By paying homage to modernist paintings, I attempt to question whether a quilt can transcend its function and become a field of color in which the viewer can feel the color relatedness. I have always been drawn to modernist works in both architecture and design. Having a degree and professional career working as a designer, I tend to have an analytical process of creating that is often rooted in the function of the work. Simultaneously, I am fascinated by the historical context and personal meaningfulness of the traditional art of quilting. My desire to reconcile these aspects of my personality drives the work that I make. I hope this quilted work can offer a point of contemplation for the artist, designer and quilter alike.

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Color Machine Gallery View

“Everyone loves the quilt, and everyone knows what quilting is, since for centuries it has been an art traditionally practiced by the women of many lands. If studied as an applied art, and properly understood, it is not only capable of a high development, but is in itself a vast field for the display of individual taste and self-expression.”¹

Quilts

There seems to be a discrepancy between what one considers art or craft. Quilts have a tendency to exist between these boundaries while continually blurring them. It is important in the work I make to understand the overall historical context of this divide.

“By most accounts, the art world “discovered” quilts in 1971, the year of the Whitney Museum of American Art’s exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*. This show featured a group of bold, geometric, pieced quilts belonging to the collectors Jonathan Holstien and Gail van der Hoof. Like an earlier exhibition at the Newark Museum of Art in 1965 titled *Optical Quilts*, the Whitney exhibition, in both its selection of pieced quilts and their installation on the wall, complemented current trends in abstract painting, granting quilts a new aesthetic status as high art by virtue of their perceived likeness to the more prestigious category of painted textiles.”²

Many argue that the merits which Holstien determined were important in choosing the quilts showcased at this exhibition, point to a male-dominated high art world.

Furthermore, the dedication of this show to anonymous women quiltmakers was seen as a way to acknowledge the maker yet conform to the priorities of a male-dominated painting world. Susan Bernick, whose work has concentrated on the changing

¹ Hall, Carrie. *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt*.

² Author, Elissa. *String, Felt, Thread*.

aesthetic status of quilts after 1970, divides quilt making into three “cultures”: the art quilter, the feminist quilter, and the traditional quilter.³

Working as a textile artist and more specifically, a quilter, I find that I am constantly shifting the context of where my artwork fits. Although, I understand the distinctions of Bernick’s quilter “cultures,” I seek to find ways in which my work can exist in all these cultures. I am drawn to the boldness and the abstractness of modernist paintings, probably much the same way as Holstien was. I intentionally chose traditional quilt methods to create a large-scale “color field” that refers to the male dominated high art of painting. *Color Machine* is about me becoming the machine, exploring and experimenting in formal academic art exercises, using traditional and stereotypical female craft methods. The work is as much about this process as it is about the final art object. Of course the final destination for this work was an art gallery and the work was created specifically for this space. Does this automatically elevate the work from craft to art? The context of the art gallery is important in understanding the contemplation of the quilts role in the art world.

³ Author, Elissa. *String, Felt, Thread*.



Detail: quilt stitching

Color

I have always been fascinated by the perception of color. I wonder if the way I see red is the way someone else perceives pink. Color descriptions are variable based on the person describing them. In this capacity color is a personal thing. Our associations with color and memory could cause us to love certain colors, while despising others. Whether we realize it or not, we all have colors that we respond to more than others. Working as a designer, I was expected to be an expert of color. Although colors can rise and fall in popularity, I felt this was truly a matter of personal taste. In interiors, the main objective was to put together a pleasing palette of colors and patterns that matched and was generally benign. Painted wall colors that would fall into the

background and be quite unnoticed, with an accent color, supplied by changing accessories was the standard approach to client satisfaction.

When I began making quilts, I naturally approached the process of selecting fabrics in a similar way. I would look for contrast in value, but overall I wanted a cohesive and pleasing palette of fabrics for my quilts. I would spend hours curating combinations and over time I began to realize that the colors and fabrics that were dominating my quilts were revealing my preference for certain colors and patterns. I realized that although I was taking time to carefully choose fabric for my quilts, I was ending up with a predictable palette. I started to notice this with the work of my quilting peers too. Then I began to notice with my students and classes that the choices people made in regard to their fabric was reflected also in the clothes they were wearing and even their homes. Breaking free from the impulses to edit certain colors can be more difficult than one would imagine.

These observations about color preference inspired me to study color and eventually experiment more with color in my work. By working from principles in Josef Alber's book, *Interaction of Color*, I began to exert a refined level of control of color in my work. For my thesis work, I was eager to get into an active working mode. I was desperate for the idea to spark so that I could become a making machine. It is through working with my hands that I begin to understand the meaning of my work. Not wanting to be bogged down with color choices, but knowing that I wanted color to be a part of my work, I determined that the fastest way for me to get working was to

devise a way to select my color randomly. This would free me to do the making and the learning.

However simple this solution may have seemed at the time, I was still not free from decision-making. Would I dye the fabrics myself, would I use purchased fabrics and why? I decided to use Robert Kaufman's Kona cotton solid fabrics primarily because of the quantity of colors and the ability to derive a system of color selection around these parameters. With 272 colors available, I knew there would be plenty of colors that I loved and hated, but I concluded they were all going to be considered equally and personal preference was forbidden. Hand dyeing the fabrics would have allowed for numerous color options and combinations, but would have been a challenge to reproduce exact colors and maintain an even color throughout a piece of cloth. Because I was seeking controlled results in experimenting with color combinations, I determined that using manufactured cotton fabrics was the best option. Commercial dyeing processes can reproduce color more accurately than dyeing fabric by hand.

This was only part of the information needed to begin making a quilt. In reading *Interaction of Color*, I learned how the quantity and proximity to other colors changes how the color is perceived. I decided that for my experiment to work, I needed to start with simple elements in the equation. I chose to make stripe quilts 42" wide by 10' tall. The stripes varied in thickness from 1-12" in whole integers, a reference to the linear foot. Sewing strips is fast and would allow me a long length of fabric to contemplate the color combinations moving through my hands under the needle of the sewing

machine. It was in these moments of sewing that I realized that the combination of two colors was always a surprise. Two colors I might never choose, sewn together, would become something beautiful. Combinations of bold colors, sewn into sections of pastels would run into whites or browns. Each time I expected a disaster I was surprised by the outcome. In the end, whether it's a paint choice, a quilt palette or a random generation, people are excited by color.



Contemplating color and color discovery

Machine

The machine aspect of this work is two-fold, the computer program and the artist as the making machine. The first aspect is the creation of the computer program that created the quilt sets. I began referring to it as *the Color Machine*. What started as an idea to quickly and randomly select color, turned into a fun and visual computer algorithm that responded with magical color sketches. The computer is a great machine in the artist's toolbox. Although naming the computer program *the Color Machine* was seemingly a thoughtless gesture I began to understand that my artist practice often revolves around the making process. I see the way in which I work as an artist as mechanical. I seek to reduce a redundant process in a streamlined and factory-like production mode.

My impulse was to become the engine of this giant quilt-making machine. When I first began sewing I was fortunate to be able to purchase a fine sewing machine, a Bernina. This uncertain purchase was intimidating because I was spending a lot of money for a machine that I was unsure I would enjoy. It turned out to be one of my better decisions. Learning to use this machine was easy and now I feel as though the sewing machine is as familiar and useful to me as my right hand. I use it fluidly, without thinking. Sewing is as comfortable to me as breathing. My concepts for making this work stemmed from thinking of ways to allow for time with the sewing machine. I wanted to illustrate my relationship with the sewing machine as an effortless yet laborious feat of

workmanship. When making a work of art, sometimes the lessons learned come from the making. This aspect of the artwork is important for me as an artist.

“We come to know in art work that we do not clearly know where we will arrive in our work, although we set the compass, our vision; that we are led, in going along, by material and work process. We have plans and blueprints, but the finished work is still a surprise. We learn to listen to voices: to the yes and no of our material, our tools, our time. We come to know that only when we feel guided by them our work takes on form and meaning, that we are misled when we follow only our will. All great deeds have been achieved under a sense of guidance.”⁴

I am not insulted when my work is recognized for its technical proficiency, rather I see it as an acknowledgment of craftsmanship that illustrates a level of understanding about who I am as an artist. I am like one with my sewing machine. I am the *Color Machine*.

“In quilting as in all other lines, the highest type of artistry has come only through patience, practice and study with a careful observation of the accumulated experiences of quilters both past and modern days.”⁵

⁴ Albers, Annie. *Selected Writing On Design*.

⁵ Hall, Carrie. *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt*.



Color Machine: artist maker

Random Generation

Generative design is a design method in which the output is generated by a set of rules or an algorithm. The initial concept for my thesis work was to create a quilted color field, but the thought of designing the patchwork pattern of color was overwhelming. In addition to Art, Mathematics was my favorite subject. It seemed to me that this would be an opportunity to apply a method of probability and statistical data into the making

of this work. By creating a random generating computer program, I could follow a series of self-imposed rules for creating my quilted color field. The idea for this work is simple; the computer will generate color strip sets, I will assemble them as quilted units, then I compose an arrangement of them to fill the gallery wall as a giant color field quilt. The parameters were: 1"-12" width strip, 272 Kona fabric color choices, and generated quilt sets in 10' lengths. The random nature of this generation results in a beautiful representation of color. By eliminating my control over which color comes next, I can allow each color to exert a power of its own.

The perception of color is further complicated when one introduces the computer into the equation. Although this work was not focused on the visual nature of a computer monitor, it brought to light some new thoughts on how color is created using hexadecimal code. Due to the time limits of this project, I consulted a colleague to write a computer algorithm for me, but I learned some interesting things about computer color. There are millions, seemingly infinite, variations of color written through hexadecimal code that can be created using a computer. As humans, our color memory and color perception is unreliable. I wondered from these millions of variations of computer color, how many would we reasonably be able to distinguish? And how would Josef Albers' ideas of color proximity work in this digital arena?

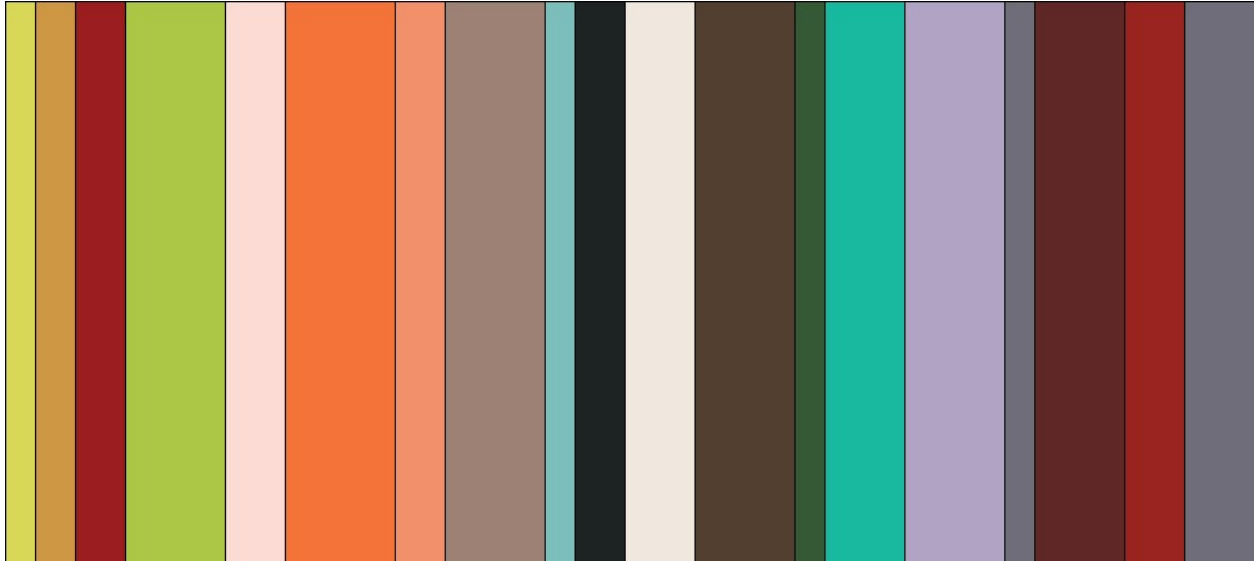
For *Color Machine*, I created a spreadsheet of data that assigned a number to the Kona fabric colors and also listed their approximate hexadecimal code. This allowed the computer renderings to resemble the actual fabrics I would use to make the quilts.

The program would create a visual rendering and text/data output. This is the information I used to construct fourteen quilted panels that would become my color field.

Because the generation of these stripe sets was a swift click of the key, I would make several in one setting. To keep with the random selection nature of this project, I decided that I could not simply select my favorite sets, but I needed a way to choose just a few. I decided that I could use random ways to select numbers from the sets. One series was from a fortune cookie's lucky numbers. I also used a variety of random number generators through various websites. This allowed for a selection process that was not influenced by my preferences. It was difficult not to skew the outcome to favorable quilt sets.

Color Machine Data Sets

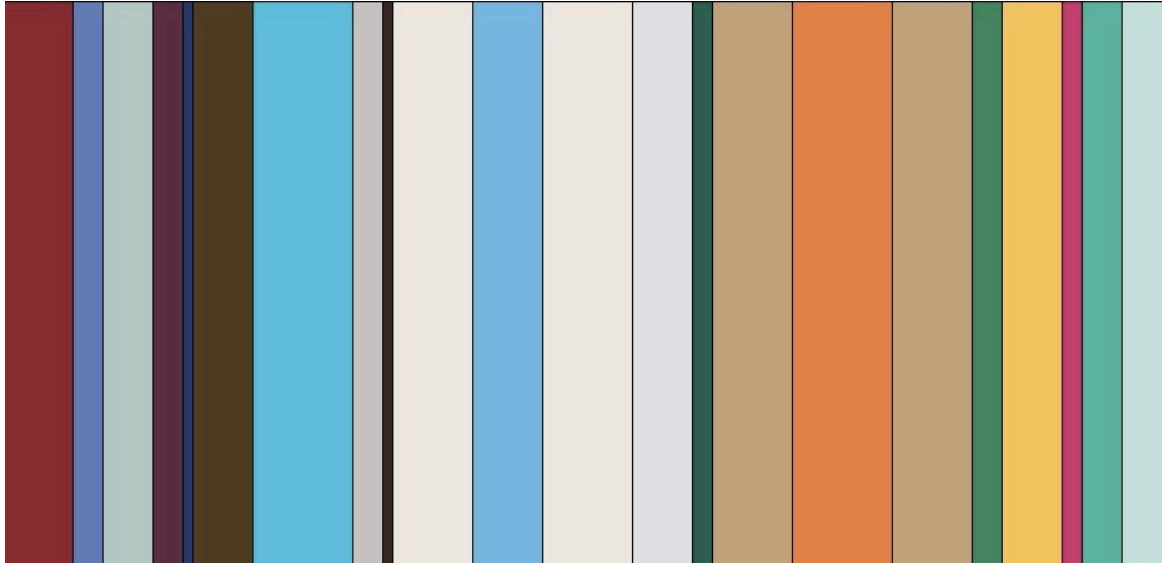
December 18: Set 1, Quilt 1



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width: 11 kona color: 26 hex color: F37338
width: 5 kona color: 27 hex color: F1906A
width: 10 kona color: 229 hex color: 9E8175
width: 3 kona color: 148 hex color: 7BBEBC
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zucchini
caramel
poppy
peapod
pale flesh
persimmon
mango
taupe
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kale
lilac
coal
cocoa
paprika
coal

December 18: Set 11, Quilt 2



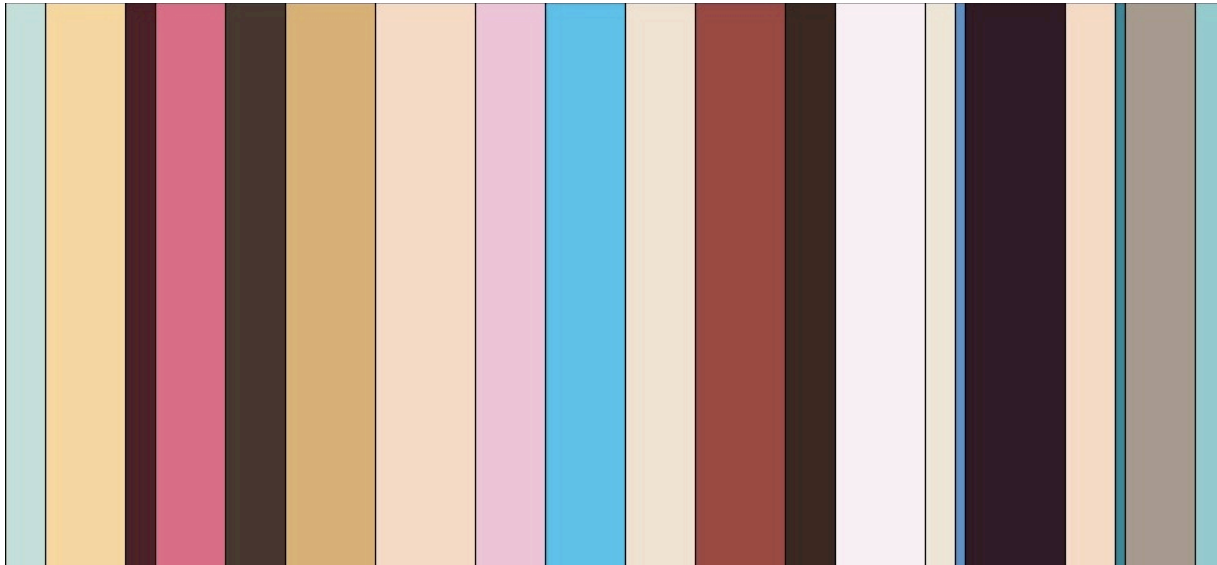
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December 23: Set 3, Quilt 3



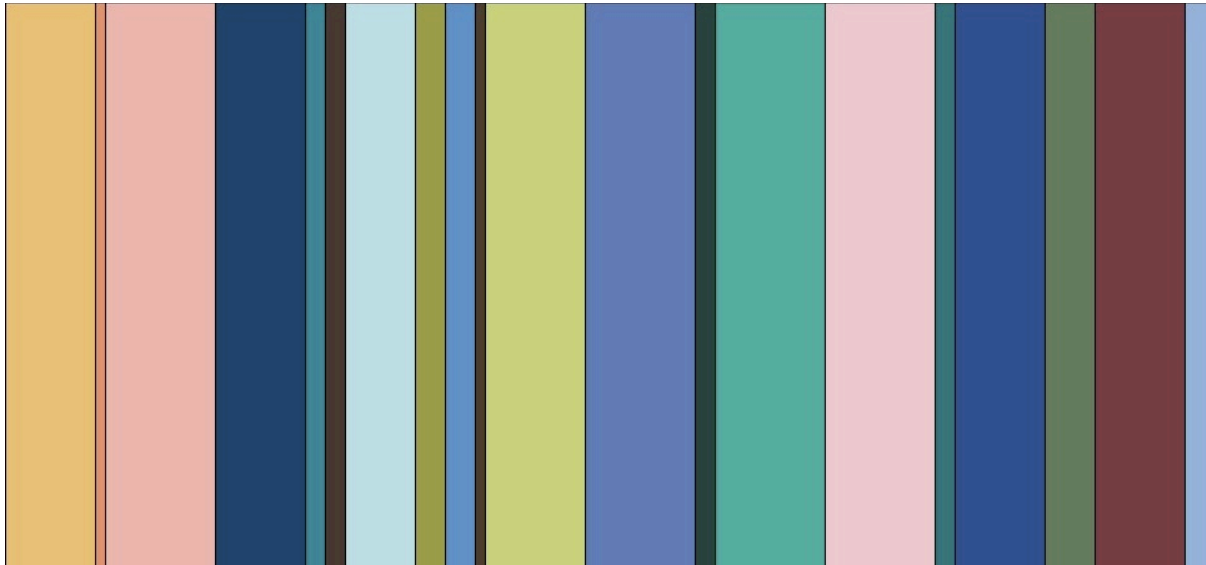
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December 23: Set 32, Quilt 4



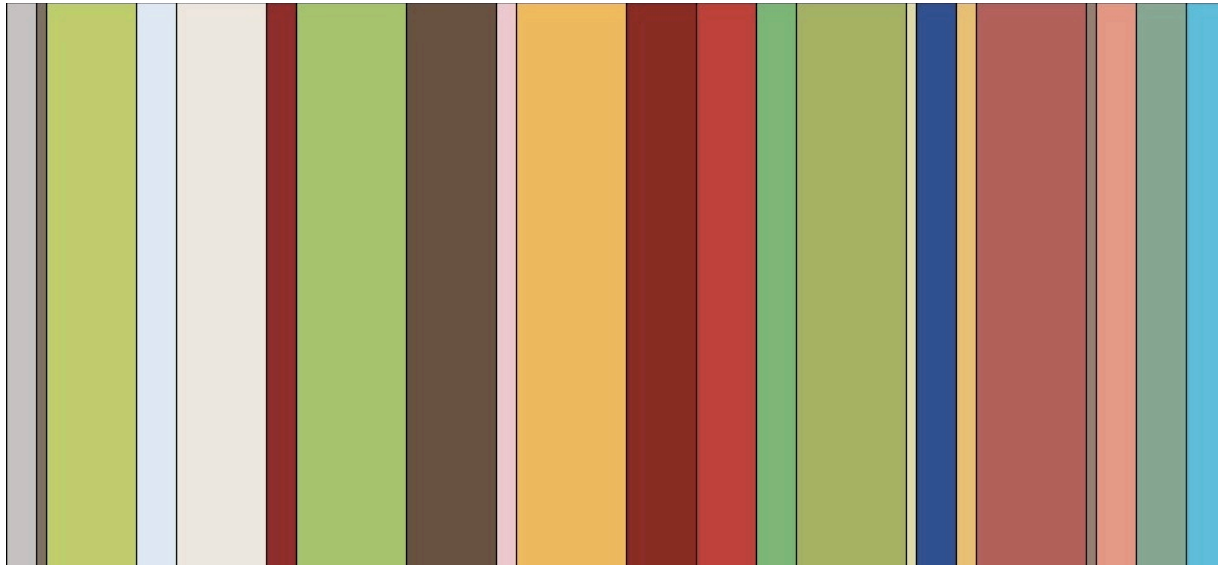
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December 23: Set 39, Quilt 5



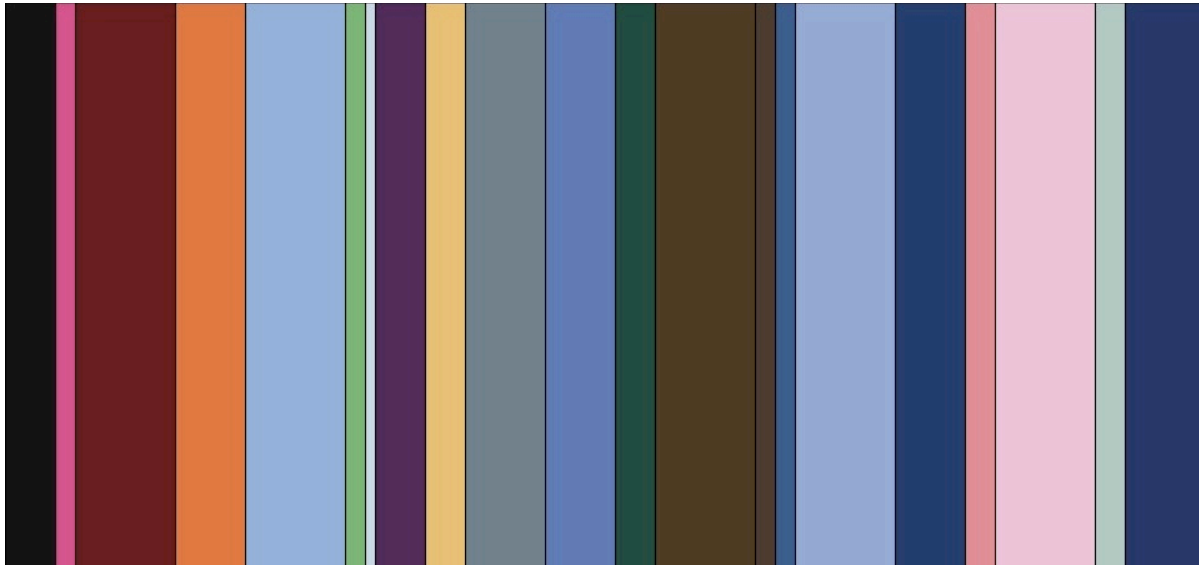
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December 29: Set 0, Quilt 6



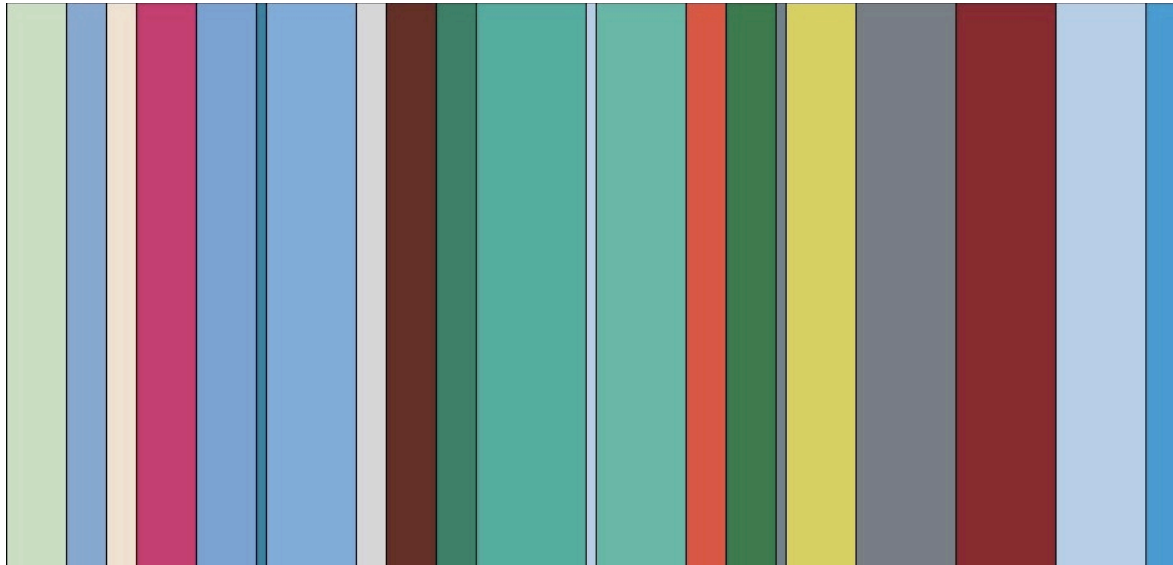
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December 29: Set 1, Quilt 7



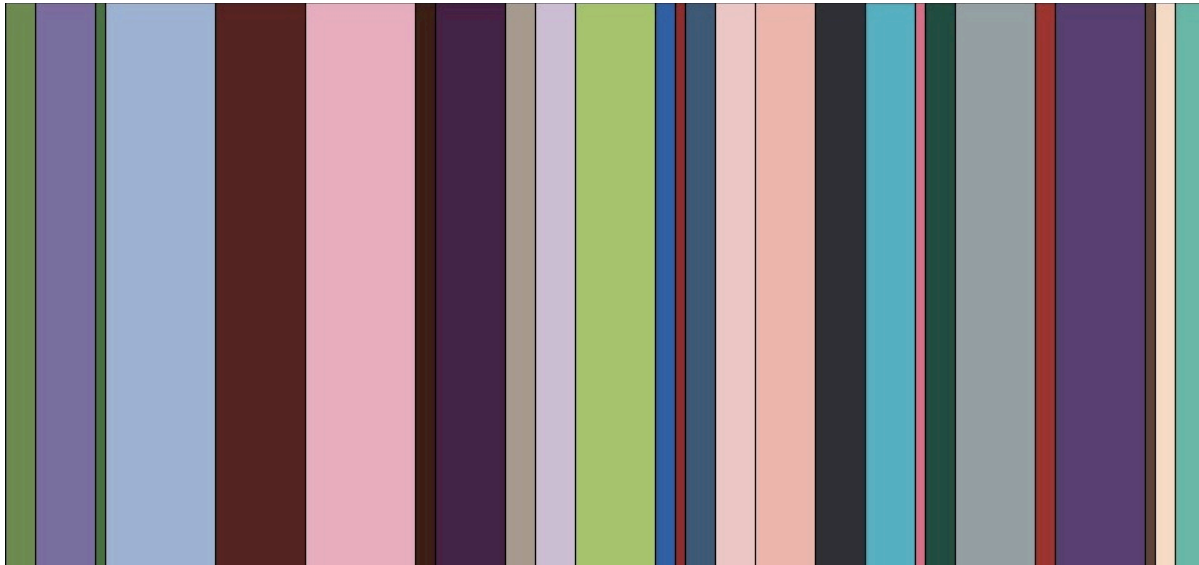
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December 29: Set 2, Quilt 8



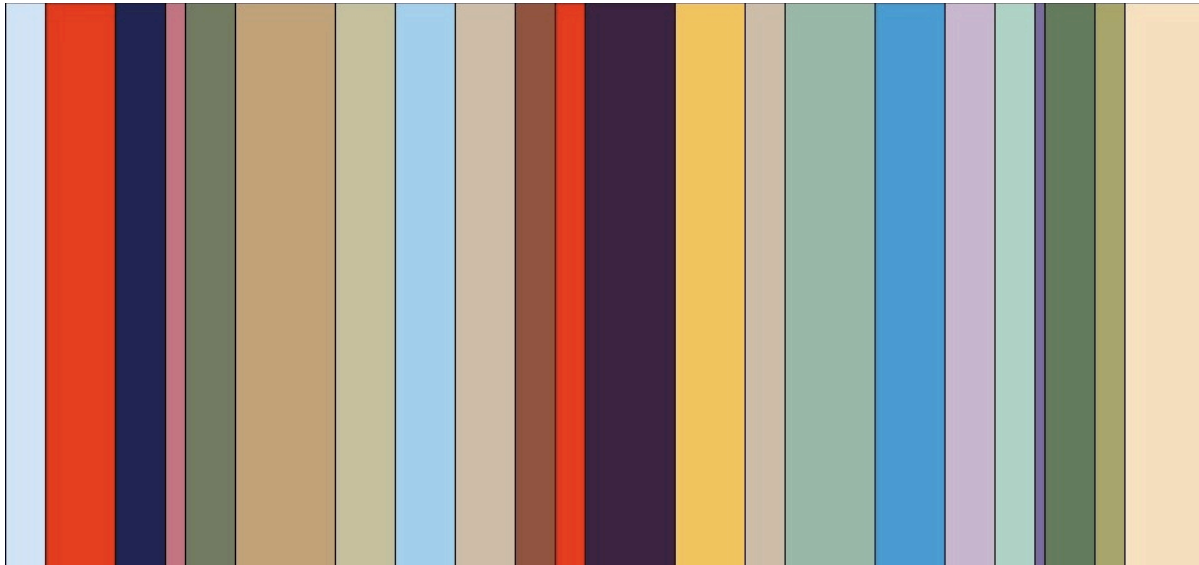
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December 29: Set 3, Quilt 9



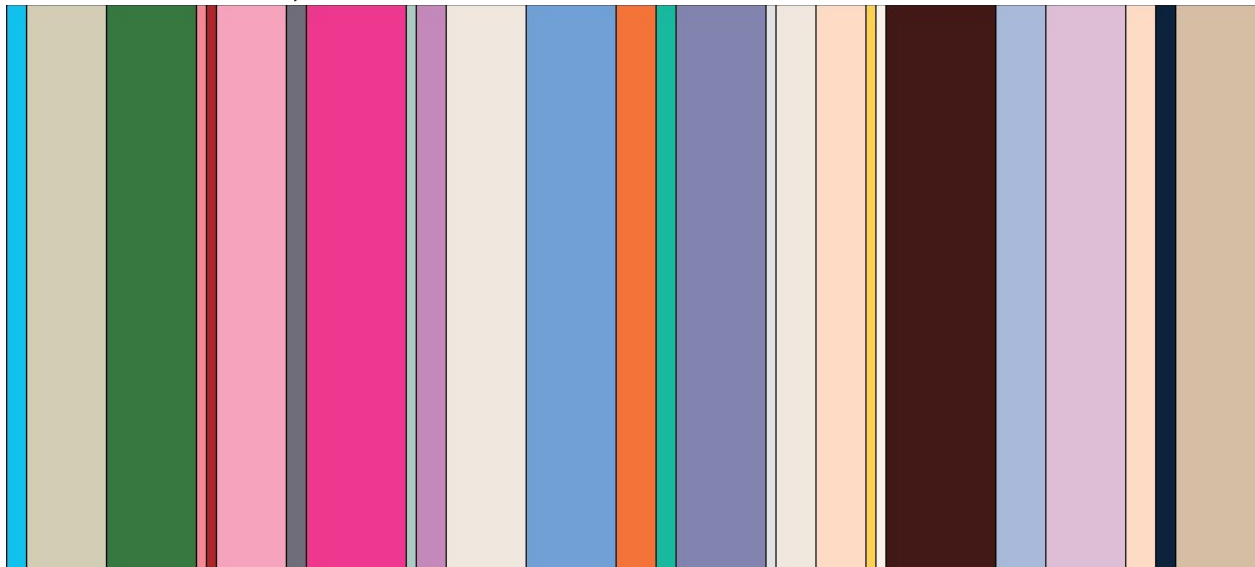
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width: 11	kona color: 110	hex color: 97B2D5	Dresden Blue
width: 9	kona color: 45	hex color: 611D22	Brick
width: 11	kona color: 79	hex color: F6A8C0	Woodrose
width: 2	kona color: 236	hex color: 431F17	Brown
width: 7	kona color: 85	hex color: 4F1A48	Eggplant
width: 3	kona color: 226	hex color: AA9D8D	Stone
width: 4	kona color: 100	hex color: D3BBD8	Orchid
width: 8	kona color: 205	hex color: 99CC66	Peridot
width: 2	kona color: 137	hex color: 225AA9	Surf
width: 1	kona color: 38	hex color: A11D2A	Chinese Red
width: 3	kona color: 126	hex color: 38587A	Cadet
width: 4	kona color: 67	hex color: F6C5C5	Primrose
width: 6	kona color: 57	hex color: F9B5AD	Peach
width: 5	kona color: 269	hex color: 313238	Charcoal
width: 5	kona color: 166	hex color: 04B4C4	Breakers
width: 1	kona color: 54	hex color: F06187	Punch
width: 3	kona color: 196	hex color: 015143	Kelly
width: 8	kona color: 263	hex color: 93A2A4	Shale
width: 2	kona color: 40	hex color: AF272D	Ruby
width: 9	kona color: 89	hex color: 5F3974	Eggplant
width: 1	kona color: 237	hex color: 66433B	Mocha
width: 2	kona color: 59	hex color: FEDBC4	Lt. Parfait
width: 3	kona color: 192	hex color: 3BBDAA	Cypress

December 30: Set 1, Quilt 10



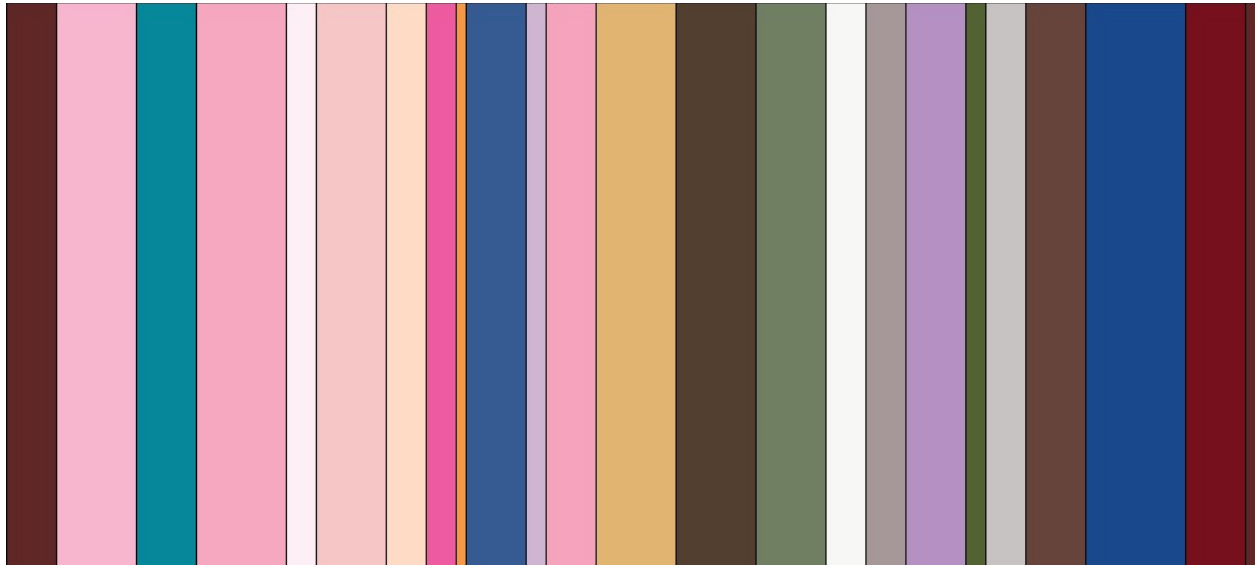
width: 4	kona color: 144	hex color: CCE4F7	Blue
width: 7	kona color: 3	hex color: FF0C00	Maize
width: 5	kona color: 133	hex color: 222256	Nightfall
width: 2	kona color: 77	hex color: D46D83	Deep Rose
width: 5	kona color: 221	hex color: 707F61	OD Green
width: 10	kona color: 240	hex color: C9A479	Honey
width: 6	kona color: 224	hex color: C6C49E	Parsley
width: 6	kona color: 142	hex color: 97D1F0	Lake
width: 6	kona color: 242	hex color: D3BFA7	Raffia
width: 4	kona color: 49	hex color: 9F523D	Spice
width: 3	kona color: 3	hex color: FF0C00	Maize
width: 9	kona color: 87	hex color: 432145	Hibiscus
width: 7	kona color: 8	hex color: FCC853	Corn Yellow
width: 4	kona color: 242	hex color: D3BFA7	Raffia
width: 9	kona color: 178	hex color: 90BDAA	Celadon
width: 7	kona color: 140	hex color: 049BD6	Water
width: 5	kona color: 93	hex color: CFB5D1	Pansy
width: 4	kona color: 170	hex color: A3D8C9	Pond
width: 1	kona color: 91	hex color: 8168A2	Crocus
width: 5	kona color: 176	hex color: 5D815C	Laurel
width: 3	kona color: 207	hex color: A9AA66	Olive
width: 8	kona color: 2	hex color: FEE3BF	Butter

December 30: Set 4, Quilt 11



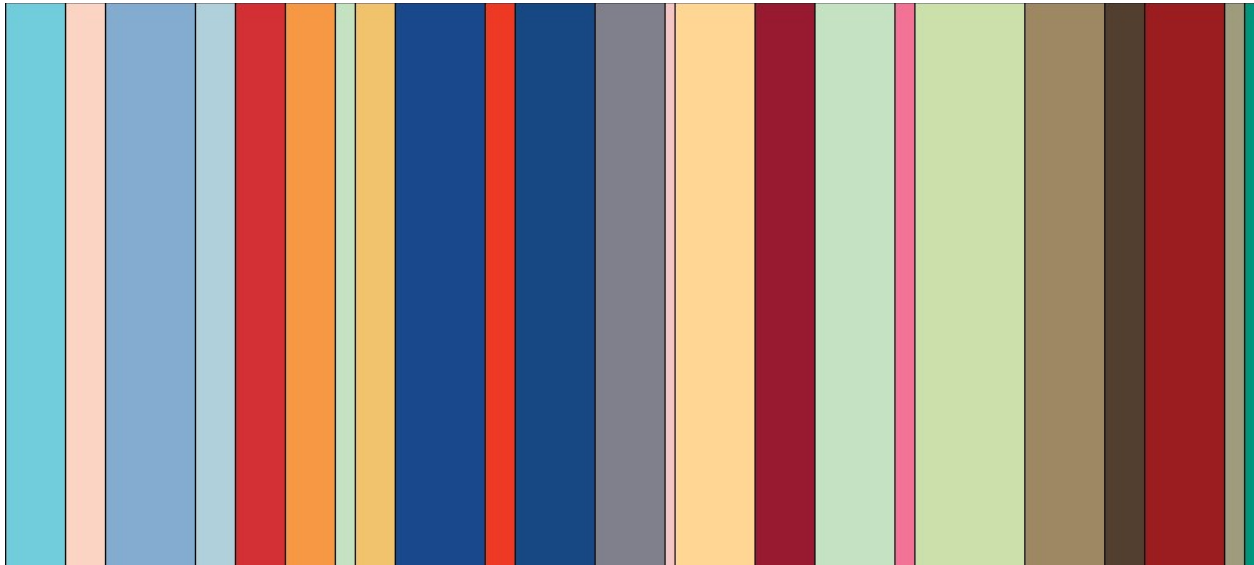
width: 2	kona color: 156	hex color: 10C2ED	Lagoon
width: 8	kona color: 244	hex color: D3CDB6	Khaki
width: 9	kona color: 160	hex color: 367840	Teal Blue
width: 1	kona color: 55	hex color: F48896	Melon
width: 1	kona color: 40	hex color: AF272D	Ruby
width: 7	kona color: 70	hex color: F6A4BD	Bubble Gum
width: 2	kona color: 266	hex color: 706D7A	Coal
width: 10	kona color: 75	hex color: EE378F	Valentine
width: 1	kona color: 180	hex color: ADCBC5	Seafoam
width: 3	kona color: 96	hex color: C588BB	Violet
width: 8	kona color: 254	hex color: F0E7DF	Oyster
width: 9	kona color: 115	hex color: 70A0D5	Blue Jay
width: 4	kona color: 26	hex color: F37338	Persimmon
width: 2	kona color: 193	hex color: 18B99F	Kale
width: 9	kona color: 102	hex color: 8383B0	Amethyst
width: 1	kona color: 258	hex color: E2E2E4	Silver
width: 4	kona color: 254	hex color: F0E7DF	Oyster
width: 5	kona color: 59	hex color: FEDBC4	Lt. Parfait
width: 1	kona color: 6	hex color: FFD150	Canary
width: 1	kona color: 253	hex color: FBF3E9	Bone
width: 11	kona color: 46	hex color: 421916	Mahogany
width: 5	kona color: 118	hex color: A8B9D9	Bluebell
width: 8	kona color: 97	hex color: DEBDD7	Petunia
width: 3	kona color: 59	hex color: FEDBC4	Lt. Parfait
width: 2	kona color: 131	hex color: 0C223D	Indigo
width: 3	kona color: 225	hex color: D5BEA4	Straw

December 30: Set 6, Quilt 12



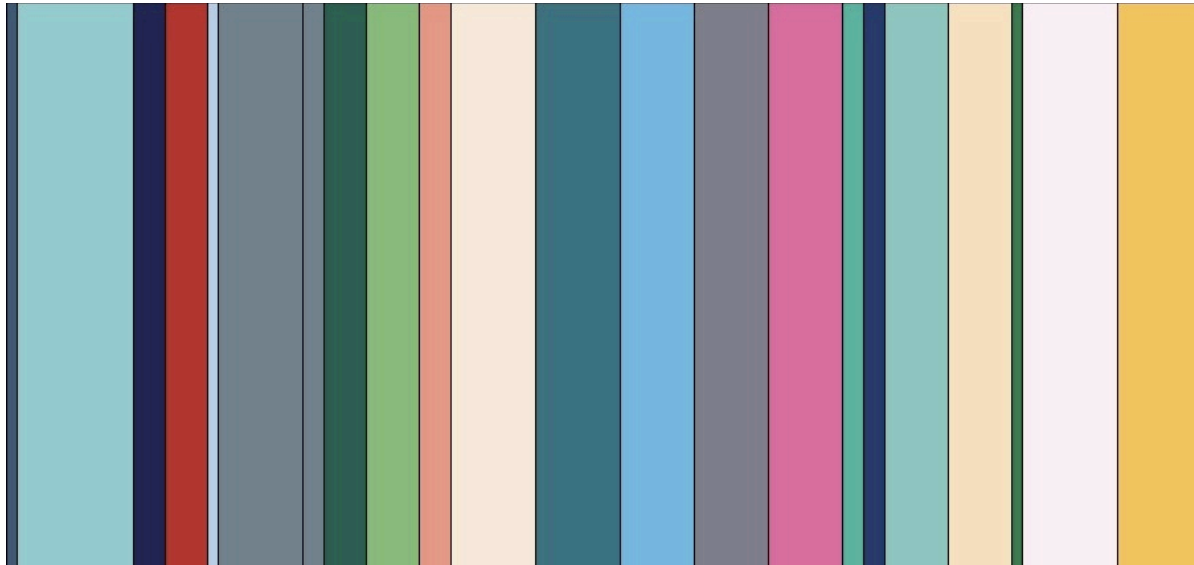
width: 5	kona color: 47	hex color: 5F2826	Mahogany
width: 8	kona color: 68	hex color: F7B5CE	Med. Pink
width: 6	kona color: 162	hex color: 06879A	Glacier
width: 9	kona color: 79	hex color: F6A8C0	Woodrose
width: 3	kona color: 61	hex color: FDEFF5	Pearl Pink
width: 7	kona color: 67	hex color: F6C5C5	Primrose
width: 4	kona color: 59	hex color: FEDBC4	Parfait
width: 3	kona color: 74	hex color: EF5BA1	Brт. Pink
width: 1	kona color: 20	hex color: F79944	Amber
width: 6	kona color: 124	hex color: 365A92	Regatta
width: 2	kona color: 93	hex color: CFB5D1	Pansy
width: 5	kona color: 70	hex color: F6A4BD	Bubble Gum
width: 8	kona color: 17	hex color: E2B471	Yarrow
width: 8	kona color: 231	hex color: 523F30	Cappuccino
width: 7	kona color: 221	hex color: 707F61	OD Green
width: 4	kona color: 256	hex color: F7F7F5	Snow
width: 4	kona color: 264	hex color: A69798	Smoke
width: 6	kona color: 92	hex color: B591C3	Wisteria
width: 2	kona color: 218	hex color: 526233	Avocado
width: 4	kona color: 260	hex color: C6C3C2	Ash
width: 6	kona color: 237	hex color: 66433B	Mocha
width: 10	kona color: 135	hex color: 19488C	Riviera
width: 2	kona color: 41	hex color: 76101D	Wine

December 30: Set 7, Quilt 13



width: 6	kona color: 152	hex color: 71CDDC	Bahama Blue
width: 4	kona color: 58	hex color: FCD4C4	Ice Peach
width: 9	kona color: 113	hex color: 83ACD0	Candy Blue
width: 4	kona color: 143	hex color: B0D1DC	Fog
width: 5	kona color: 33	hex color: D23034	Lipstick
width: 5	kona color: 20	hex color: F79944	Amber
width: 2	kona color: 172	hex color: C5E3C3	Mint
width: 4	kona color: 9	hex color: F1C36D	Curry
width: 9	kona color: 135	hex color: 19488C	Riviera
width: 3	kona color: 31	hex color: EE3A24	Tangerine
width: 8	kona color: 139	hex color: 174884	Pacific
width: 7	kona color: 261	hex color: 807F8C	Med. Grey
width: 1	kona color: 67	hex color: F6C5C5	Primrose
width: 8	kona color: 12	hex color: FFD693	Daffodil
width: 6	kona color: 39	hex color: 981A31	Rich Red
width: 8	kona color: 172	hex color: C5E3C3	Mint
width: 2	kona color: 72	hex color: F27395	Camellia
width: 11	kona color: 182	hex color: CBE0AB	Green Tea
width: 8	kona color: 239	hex color: 9E8863	Biscuit
width: 4	kona color: 231	hex color: 523F30	Cappuccino
width: 6	kona color: 35	hex color: 9C1D20	Poppy

December 30: Set 27, Quilt 14



width: 5 kona color: 126 hex color: 38587A	cadet
width: 11 kona color: 153 hex color: 81CFD0	capri
width: 3 kona color: 133 hex color: 222256	nightfall
width: 4 kona color: 34 hex color: C7202A	tomato
width: 1 kona color: 120 hex color: B2CFE9	blueberry
width: 8 kona color: 268 hex color: 6E8390	graphite
width: 2 kona color: 268 hex color: 6E8390	graphite
width: 4 kona color: 195 hex color: 006453	willow
width: 5 kona color: 185 hex color: 72C279	sour apple
width: 3 kona color: 56 hex color: F69483	salmon
width: 8 kona color: 250 hex color: FAEAD7	cream
width: 8 kona color: 163 hex color: 247382	everglade
width: 7 kona color: 121 hex color: 5CB7E2	stratosphere
width: 7 kona color: 261 hex color: 807F8C	med. Grey
width: 7 kona color: 74 hex color: EF5BA1	brt. Pink
width: 2 kona color: 193 hex color: 18B99F	kale
width: 2 kona color: 136 hex color: 24366F	ocean
width: 6 kona color: 168 hex color: 79CBC1	candy green
width: 6 kona color: 2 hex color: FEE3BF	butter
width: 1 kona color: 189 hex color: 00824E	clover
width: 9 kona color: 61 hex color: FDEFF5	pearl pink
width: 11 kona color: 8 hex color: FCC853	corn yellow

Quilted Color Field

There were no rules or systems that were employed to create the layout. I simply went with what felt right to me. The dissection and arrangement of the quilted strip sets is the point in the work that is the most reflective of the artist hand. I made some choices that would allow the viewer some access to the assemblage of the work. Quilts were cut in half and separated but within close proximity, or inverted from top to bottom. The standard 42" wide quilt sets are the most predominant sets within the work. The quilting, although subtle, was done on either side to the seam line, one side with dark grey thread and the other with light grey thread. Those who wish to explore the work up close can have a small lesson on color value.

Before assembling the final composition, I was working under rules for making that I had imposed on myself. These rules were put in place in order to achieve specific objectives. Initially, I knew that I wanted to fill an entire gallery wall with color. Like the work of Color Field painters, such as Rothko, I wanted to fill the viewer's field of vision with a massive and overwhelming scale. I was purposefully representing a male dominant art field and filling it, not perversely but intentionally, with a stereotypically female associated craft. I chose the simple pattern of the stripe due to the nature of quick construction and also for its lack of reference to a specific quilt block. The integers from one to twelve inches represent the linear foot, a clear system of measure for any architect or designer. This familiarity and memory of measure would lend a familiar scale for me to interpret the color lessons within the work. I was seeking an

experiment in color, not necessarily of pattern. I chose to have the computer algorithm vary the width of stripe to create visual rhythm and hierarchy.

“Color not only appears in uncountable shades and tints, but is additionally characterized by shape and size, by recurrence and placement...”⁶

The act of quilting my work is important to me not necessarily because of the feminine associations, but because of the methods employed, the tactile nature of the making and the ability to be in sync with a sewing machine. These are the aspects of working in which I feel rooted. Here I am connected to a lineage of quilters, sewists, designers, engineers, and makers of all kind.

⁶ Albers, Josef. *Interaction of Color*.

Conclusion

The final installation of this work is epic in scale. Building a 10'x47' quilt is not a typical goal for a quilter. Yet making a quilt of this magnitude offers the viewer, quilter or not, a sense of wonder. It is clearly not meant to function as a quilt would in a standard utilitarian way. The quilter can wonder about how it was made so large, understanding the problems that one would encounter in sewing this on a sewing machine. The color field created on the gallery wall provides points of contemplation for all viewers.

Although I created the final composition, it was the random generating color machine that provided the source for the color combinations. This enables a truly immersive experience in color, in which the viewer can explore areas of interest and color relatedness. By creating a quilt as a color field painting, my hope is to start a conversation about learning through making and our everyday experience with objects.



Color Machine: experiment for color relatedness

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